

# ***The Coat Hanger: An analysis of the Sydney Harbour Bridge in relation to Modernity and Postmodernity***

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The Sydney Harbour Bridge has become a recognised symbol of Sydney and Australia. Despite it being historically documented it has not been analysed in terms of specifically applying the concepts of modernity and postmodernity. This article explores the facets of the Harbour Bridge by applying modern and postmodern concepts to the historical information to gain a greater understanding of the Bridge and the present moment we live in. From this we can conclude that these concepts, although maybe not consciously in the mindset of those at the time, provided the foundations for the development of the Bridge. Modernist ideas upheld and praised science used in the Bridge construction. Progress was embraced leading to pressure from society to build the Bridge, which resulted in Sydney's progression beyond the Bridge. Ideas of equality and secularisation were associated with the Bridge. A renewed interest in the history of the Bridge resulted from postmodern ideas of looking back upon the past however this raises questions of exploiting the past. The Bridge can be understood as a site of chaos from a postmodern view as it takes on multiple meanings. Sydney would not be as we know it today without the influence of these concepts.



*Figure 1: Sydney Harbour Bridge*

Modernity and postmodernity provide an explanation as to how and why the Sydney Harbour Bridge has evolved into its current state in the present moment. The Sydney Harbour Bridge opened in 1932 and was seen as a 'symbol of modernity' (Carson 2009, p.421) as it was a sign of 'technological prowess' (Spearritt 2007, p.150) and showed Sydney's progression from a convict agrarian settlement to a modern metropolis. The role of the Bridge has diversified over the decades, initially being regarded as a functional transport link between North Sydney and the City to presently taking on numerous meanings and roles and thus acts as a focal point for society to express itself in multiple ways. The ideas of modernity and postmodernity provide an explanation of the rationale behind various facets of the Bridge

including science and technology, progress, society's response to the Bridge, resurgence in the interest in history, and the Bridge's role as a 'stage' for multiple meanings. Therefore, these concepts enable us to understand how and why the Bridge has become what it is today and how it has impacted on the present moment we live in.

### **Science and technology**

The construction of the Bridge relied on the use of science and technology which is a fundamental aspect of modernity. Science was the 'epitome of enlightened reason' (Hamilton 1992, p.37) as it upheld the Enlightenment idea of rationality and its application to society was believed to result in its progression. Australian society in the 1930s could be seen to be endorsing the modernist attitude of reason and thus the application of scientific knowledge as Gilmore (1932) described the white settlers of Sydney as men of 'healthy minds and visions' (1932, p.5) in contrast to the Aboriginals who were seen as 'primitive' and 'low in the scale of humanity' (1932, p.5) in relation to their ability to develop Sydney Harbour and achieve the modernist goal of turning 'chaos into order' (1932, p.7). Scientists and engineers acquired knowledge for the Bridge development and construction through experience (Hamilton 1992, p.37) and experimentation at universities which were a 'legacy of the Enlightenment' (Olsson 2010, Slide 4). Therefore, they had 'courage to use their own understanding' (Kant 1784, p.1). The 'universality' (Hamilton 1992, p.21) of science and reason enabled the application of worldwide scientific theories and inspiration for the Bridge such as New York's Hell Gate Bridge (Spearritt 2007, p.35).

Modernity focused on man's desire to conquer and control nature to improve society (Hamilton 1992, p.37) through using science and reason. This modernist concept provides an explanation as to why there was a strong desire by man in the early years of the colony to conquer nature by proposing to build a bridge of convenience between the North and South of Sydney Harbour. Prior to white settlement, the Harbour remained in its natural state, untouched by its Aboriginal inhabitants who had no requirement or desire for a bridge (Lalor 2005, p.32).

Futurist, Erasmus Darwin envisioned a bridge spanning the Harbour in 1791 (Lalor 2005, p.47), however it was not until 1815 when Government architect, Francis Greenway, made the 'first serious proposal' (Mackaness 2006, p.56). This failed due to inadequate technology and society's 'priority' (Mackaness 2006, p.56) of establishing an agricultural settlement (Mackaness 2006, p.56). Throughout the 1800s and early 1900s man's determination and struggle to solve the problem of linking the natural shores was reinforced by the numerous bridge proposals made by engineers, including an underground tunnel (Spearritt 2007, p.22). In 1924 the arch bridge design linking Milson's Point and Dawes Point was finalised – the Bridge was tall enough to enable the Harbour to still operate as a port, wide enough to meet increasing population levels projected for the 1950s (Spearritt 2007, p.31), and technology was adequate. Gilmore (1932, p.74) fittingly stated that 'science has laboured' to develop and build the bridge; and JJC Bradfield, the engineer behind the development of the Bridge, proclaimed that 'engineering has enabled mankind to understand and conquer nature' (Mackaness 2006, p.53). These statements reflect the modernist ideas of man's struggle and triumph over nature. It is argued by Gay (Hamilton 1992, p.40) that 'in the struggle of man against nature the balance of power was shifting in favour of man'. However, Lalor (2005) indicates that the Bridge could be one of the few man-made structures where 'nature and man co-exist in...harmony' (Lalor 2005, p.44).

The application of science from a modernist perspective was that it was meant to bring human happiness (Hamilton 1992, p.37) and satisfaction. This modernist idea provides an explanation for why the Bridge was given this function. Bradfield promoted these modernist ideals as he claimed 'workers could reside further a-field and enjoy fresh air and sunlight' (Bradfield in Spearritt 2007, p.30) due to the erection of the Bridge. The *Sydney Harbour Bridge Souvenir* booklet also stated that the Bridge 'extended human happiness' (Gilmore 1932, p.74).

As modernity upheld science and technology we are able to understand why society praised science and the men behind the development of this modern wonder. Engineers and scientists were regarded as 'nation builders' (Spearritt 2007, p.32) as they were enabling society to conquer nature, progress, and achieve a state of happiness. This is reinforced by the fact that the development and building of the Bridge were covered extensively by the media; Bradfield was treated like a celebrity (Lalor 2005, p.43); and the *Sydney Harbour Bridge Souvenir* booklet dedicated a page to Sydney being in 'debt to science' (Gilmore 1932, p.74) and praised experimental physicist, James Clerk Maxwell for 'developing the theory for calculating elastic deformation of structures on which...the Bridge is based' (Gilmore 1932, p.74).

## **Progress**

Modernity embraced progress as it 'rejected the legacy of the past...and sought to create the world anew' (Gott in Thompson 1992, p.222). The Bridge was a symbol of progress, and can be understood by applying the various modernist ideas of progress.

In the 1920s Sydney's population of over 1 million people was unevenly distributed, with two-thirds living in the south of the Harbour and one-third living in the North (Lalor 2005, p.37). The methods to travel to the City from the North were limited with commuters either travelling by horse and buggy along the 'Five Bridges' (Mackaness 2006, p.56) or boarding the overcrowded (Spearritt 2007, p.25) and unreliable ferries (Barker 1913, pers.comm. 1 April). Society demanded a bridge to bring order to the chaos in Sydney, a modernist idea (Klages 2003, para. 11), to hopefully distribute the increasing population to the North and improve poor transport methods as people believed that 'the present mode (of transport) is not suitable for the requirements of the age we live in' (Statement to Minister for Public Works 1878 in Mackaness 2006, p.82). This attitude is further reinforced by a letter written by my relative in 1913: 'How independent would we feel if we had a bridge. It is time something was done in that direction' (Barker 1913 pers.comm., 6 April).

The reasons behind society embracing progress, change and movement into the modern age to meet society's demands and thus our understanding of a reason why the Bridge was built can be seen through applying Gay's (Hamilton 1992, p.40) opinion that modernity involved society's 'fear of change...giving way to a fear of stagnation'. This desire and attitude for development and progress is highlighted by the 1930s perspective that the 'land...lay asleep for centuries' and its original inhabitants 'had no idea of the potential wealth of their dominion nor had they the initiative to develop it' (Gilmore 1932, p.5) compared to the settlers. Society established the Sydney and North Shore Junction League in 1906 (Lalor 2005, p.51) which campaigned for a bridge to be built. The people also voted for politicians who were going to bring in measures that would progress society, for example Spearritt (2007, p.22) suggests that as Henry Parkes' campaign focused on building a bridge: 'Now who will stand at my right hand and build the bridge with me?' (Spearritt 2007, p.22), it

helped him win the election for the seat of St Leonards in 1885. Therefore, as 'modernity is an insistence upon the now – the present and future as resistance to the past' (Friedman 2001, p.503) it explains why many people had a positive attitude towards development and change, and hence the Bridge.

In order for the Bridge to be constructed areas on the North and South of the Harbour had to be demolished to make way for the 'forward march of progress' (Gilmore 1932, p.56). The Rocks, the first suburb of the colony, had many of its original buildings demolished which included convict huts, and thus part of the history and traditions of the area were lost. The ease and carefree attitude of many of the people to demolish the historical buildings rather than preserve them is highlighted by an article in the Daily Telegraph that stated society: 'pauses to lament the passing of old Sydney' (Daily Telegraph 19 March 1932 p.17 in Mackaness 2006, p.136) which could show the loss had no long term impact. The century old Scots Presbyterian Church was demolished however, the prospects of a new church were embraced (Mackaness 2006, p.143). Therefore, these attitudes can be understood through the modernist belief of 'declaring independence' (Friedman 2001, p.503) from the past by 'ruthless forgetting and a desire to wipe out whatever came earlier' (Paul de Man in Friedman 2001, p.504). The focus was on embracing the new and moving forward.

As progress was embraced, the Bridge was built and provided Sydney with the ability to progress from an agrarian settlement to an industrial and modern city. Sydney was seen to be the Australian version of New York which was also a symbol of 'urban progress' (Spearritt 2007, p.48). Therefore, the Bridge acted as an ignition for the continued modernisation and change in Sydney as we know it in the present day. This resulted in urbanisation of the North Shore as the Bridge made commuting to the city easier. The Bridge encouraged further development of the CBD as it provided the transport link. In turn, as the population has grown the Bridge has not been able to cope which has resulted in transport developments that still fail to solve the traffic congestion problems such as the Warringah Expressway (1978), the Harbour Tunnel (1992) (Lalor 2005, p.341), and the Cross City Tunnel. In 1932, Sydney Ferries believed the Bridge would only be a short term solution to the chaotic state of Sydney Harbour (Gilmore 1932, p.110). However, this claim has an element of bias as the ferry companies thought the Bridge would make them redundant. The prediction of the companies is very true as present Sydney has not progressed to overcome its problems of the chaotic and polluted days of the ferries. Thompson (1992, p.223) states that 'modernist ideas of technological progress may be the cause of problems of pollution, waste...rather than the solutions'. Therefore, progress causes further demands for progression as the solutions become short term fixes rather than permanent ones. Society progresses until its line of progress becomes impotent and ineffectual. It ends up, like in the present moment with the Harbour Bridge with just as much chaos and many problems as when the initial 'solution' of the Bridge was proposed. Progress appears to be positive at the time, but the Bridge shows that it creates a cascade effect of problems that have to be solved. Thus we have to question whether the erection of the Bridge was really a positive development.

### **Society's response to the Bridge**

The social response to the Bridge can be understood by the modernist idea of the Enlightenment Period that 'propagated concepts of equality' (Hamilton 1992, p.33). Prior to the Bridge, Sydney was physically, 'socially and politically divided' (Carson 2009, p.418). The Bridge, however, was professed as a 'symbol which every social class could share' (Spearritt 2007, p.90). The idea of equality was reflected in Lang's decision to make the

opening of the Bridge a 'public affair' (Lalor 2005, p.329) and not restricted to the rich and powerful which was reinforced by allowing all classes of people to walk across the Bridge together, creating an image of a united society. Although the Bridge remains in public ownership, this modernist belief of the Bridge uniting people with 'similar aims and ideals' (Lang in Lalor 2005, p.331) regardless of class has not fully eventuated. Spearritt (2007, p.168) makes a valid observation that the Bridge continues to divide an 'unequal city' as the 'wealthy, conservative, high income earners live in the North' (Spearritt 2007, p.168). Thus, the Bridge to a certain extent is a neutral entity acting as the divider of social classes residing in the North and South of the Harbour.

The opening of the Bridge received strong opposition from Church leaders including the Bishop of Bathurst who demanded people 'boycott' (Spearritt 2007, p.80) the celebratory week as it was coinciding with Lent and was therefore disrespectful (Spearritt 2007, p.80). As modernity rejected religious authority and was dominated by secularism (Turner 1991, p.6), this could be one of the many reasons for people not following the authority of the Church as it possibly no longer possessed a high level of power and control of the people. The lack of religious control is further reinforced as the 'opening of the Bridge brought together the largest gathering of people ever seen in Sydney' (Spearritt 2007, p.78), approximately 1 million people (Spearritt 2007, p.78), with the majority highly likely being Christians as it was the most predominant religious affiliation of Australians in 1933, being 86.4% (ABS 2008, 14.38).

### **Renewed interest in history**

Society's renewed interest in the history of Sydney, including the Harbour Bridge from the 1970s and onwards can be explained through postmodern ideas as they 'propose a return to historical values' (Lash 1991, p.66) and an interest in looking upon past history and styles. According to Spearritt (2007, p.146), the 1970s saw an interest in the 1920s Art Deco period. This provided a reason for the renewed fascination in the Bridge as it was a product of Art Deco styling as its shape was based on the 'sunrise Art Deco motif' (The Age 2008, p.243). Bradfield, although his ideas and statements were very modernist based, had an element of postmodernism, as he wanted the Bridge to be a landmark of the 1930s where 'future generations will judge our generation by our works' (Spearritt 2007, p.39). Therefore, although the modernist ideas of the 1930s were physically destroying the past through progress, society was in fact creating a new history. By the 1950s the Bridge was in disrepair as it was not being maintained, however, with the development of the city professing 'international capitalism' (Spearritt 2007, p.156) as well as the rising prominence of postmodern ideas and preserving the past in the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s, when 'conservation became the rage', (Gott in Thompson 1992, p.222) Bradfield's hope became operative. The Bridge began to be maintained and took on a greater significance as being one of Sydney's remaining and intact structures of the past, providing a link with Sydney's history and reflecting the hope of people when they strived for progress and embraced technological and scientific advancements.

Renewed interest in the Bridge also resulted in an eagerness to collect historical Bridge memorabilia. The original memorabilia was regarded by many people prior to the 1970s and 1980s (Mackaness 2006, p.260) as 'kitsch' (Spearritt 2007, p.146), which is in keeping with the modernist idea of progress – out with the old and in with the new and rejecting the legacy of the past even though many souvenir booklets such as 'Sydney Bridge Celebrations' (Spearritt 2007, p.88) were promoted with postmodern ideas of becoming historical items.

Venturi claims 'postmodernists have been fascinated by...kitsch' (Thompson 1992, p.233) which explains why these items have become sought after. However, there is an issue as to whether there is a genuine interest in the past and having a nostalgic keepsake or whether it purely driven by financial gains, as according to Mackaness (2006, p.260), Bridge souvenirs are some of the most collectable and profitable of Australian memorabilia.

The current role of the Pylon as museum can be explained by modernist and postmodernist concepts. The Pylon was initially a post office, followed by a funfair, and during WW2 was transformed into a machine gun post (Lalor 2005, p.346). The original uses of the Pylon express modernist ideas as its purpose was not to acknowledge the past. From 1948-1971 the Pylon was a site of chaos and thus was more postmodern as it was a commercial operation (Lalor 2005, p.346-347) that sold food and souvenirs, displayed objects of Australia's history which enabled people to look back on the past, and was the home to many cats ('Pylon Lookout 1960' in Billington 1999, p.80). In 1982 the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Bridge was celebrated and saw the establishment of a museum in the Pylon that exhibits the history of the Bridge which is still operating to this day. Harvey quoting Hewison (Thompson 1992, p.269) claims that 'postmodernism and the heritage industry are linked' as 'both conspire to create a shallow screen that intervenes between our present lives and our history' and that the 'growth of museum culture' in the 1970s has aided in the 'commercialisation of history' (Thompson 1992, p.269). Therefore, although postmodernism focuses on delving back into the past which has aided in the growth of museum culture, it does raise the question as to whether the history industry really appreciates the past or whether it is exploiting history to meet society's demands in order to make a profit.

### **The Bridge – a 'stage'**

The postmodern ideas of fragmentation, chaos, discourse, fluidity (Klages 2003, para.13 and 21) and combining elements of the past and present (O'Shaughnessy 1999, p.243) aid in understanding the Bridge's present role in society. The initial role of the Bridge was to act as a functional roadway, and any meanings of the Bridge were closely related to it such as a sign of progress, technological achievement, and the sunrise motif symbolised 'hope and optimism' (The Age 2008, p.243) during the Depression. Therefore, the Bridge was following the Enlightenment concept of human identity where identity is fixed and 'remains essentially the same' (Hall 1992, p.275).

Lalor (2005, p.340) describes the Bridge as a 'stage' which implies Foucault's theory of a subject having multiple discourses influenced by 'social context' (Leeuwen 2005, p.94) and an individuals' interpretation. This can be applied to understand why the Bridge has numerous meanings. A possible analogy and explanation of the Bridge's identity can also be drawn with postmodern ideas that human identity is 'not fixed, essential or permanent' (Hall 1992, p.277) but rather 'identity becomes moveable – formed and transformed continuously' (Hall 1992, p.277). These postmodernist concepts provide possible explanations why the Bridge's identity is moveable, and has transformed from a once ordered to now chaotic and fragmented site.

Structurally the Bridge has not changed but has taken on multiple meanings. These include: a place for suicide as it was a 'dramatic way to die' (Spearritt 2007, p.103); protests such as the Reconciliation Walk (2000) (Mackaness 2006, p.270) where the Bridge was used symbolically to 'bridge' the gap between Aboriginals and non-Aboriginals; subject of films and artworks; Earth Hour; background drops for the news to represent Sydney; wedding

photos; fireworks celebrations for New Years Eve, the Olympics and various other events; terrorist target, which reinforces that the bridge is a recognised and important icon that symbolises Australia; a contrast between being a place of traffic nightmares to a social venue promoting positive feelings and unity at celebratory events; the Bridge symbolises the division geographically and 'delineates lifestyle' (Carson 2009, p.418); and is a site for profit making from tolls, tourism and residential properties.

The Bridge was a new tourism image that deviated from the traditional association of Australia with the outback and Aborigines (Lalor 2005, p.342) and thus has become a 'Tourist Mecca' which is mass marketed to the world as a brand; for example, 'Picnic on the Bridge' (2009) and the commercial operation of 'Bridge Climb'.

Purchasing expensive Harbour side properties to obtain front row views of the 'stage' is understood through postmodern architectural ideas that 'appearance and image have priority over the technical, practical and efficient' (Rosenau 1992, p.7). Living on the Harbour is regarded as a status symbol as well as the fact that the Bridge is more predominately looked upon as a structure of beauty rather than having a functional purpose in the present moment. This represents the 21<sup>st</sup> century attitude is more informed by postmodern ideas than the modernist attitudes of the 1930s.

## Conclusion

The various elements of the Sydney Harbour Bridge can be understood through applying the concepts of modernity and postmodernity as they aid in explaining how and why the Bridge was built, why people had certain attitudes towards the Bridge, why the Bridge has taken on multiple meanings, and why people have embraced and preserved the history of the Bridge. The City would not be as we know it today without the influence of modern and postmodern concepts as they are fundamental elements on which the Bridge is based even though people may not realise this consciously. The Bridge is the centre piece of the city, holding both the North and South together from which the development of Sydney has spanned. The present generation, like the past still look in awe upon man's rainbow.

## Notes on Contributor

Katherine Sharah is studying a Bachelor of Arts in Communications (Social Inquiry) and a Bachelor of Laws. She has chosen to write about the Sydney Harbour Bridge as she is interested in the history of Sydney and exploring the progression of society.

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